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The IMF as Financial Policeman

May 3, 1988

--After reading Cheryl Payer, Teresa Hayter, Steve Weissman, and (initially) Pion-Berlin, I have an entirely broader and different perspective on the role of violence in the international system.

Much earlier I had come to see stratetic nuclear capability as supporting First Strike threats; and these in turn as backing up tactical First Use threats, deterring the Soviet Union from threatening, contemplating or implementing Second Use retaliation to US First Use (and more generally, from direct non-nuclear intervention or "excessive" support to clients that would challenge the US to make First Use threats. The FU threats, in turn, made the threat or practice of US non-nuclear intervention more effective, reducing the risk either that it would fail, that it might involve serious tactical defeats (Dienbienphus) would be stalemated, or would require costly and risky escalation.

Thus, the spectrum of US means of violence, from the Rapid Deployment Force and the Navy up through neutron warheads to H-bombs and the MX/D5 and Star Wars, supported a unified Threat System, to dominate a global Sphere of Influence up to the Soviet borders.

More recently (since joining ARDIS) I have seen Covert Action as part of this same specturm and Threat System. It arises out of the same motives (whatever these are--to be considered) as intervention, and it magnifies these incentives. As I have been saying at ARDIS seminars, "If an all-out nuclear war ever arises, it will probably emerge from a failed attempt at a limited nuclear war, which will probably have emerged from a failed attempt at a unilateral, limited tactical nuclear initiative to back up a failed or stalemated attempt to win a limited non-nuclear intervention. And that US intervention will probably have followed (and perhaps been caused by) failed covert operations, perhaps decades of covert "commitment" in that region.

Why covert? (I.e., why is the very involvement of the USG in this region, or its particular activities, concealed, lied about, hidden by deceptive cover stories: particularly, to conceal the fact of high-level decisionmaking, Presidential awareness and choices?) Commonly because the US role and its particular actions are illegal or immoral: violating international legal or treaty (and perhaps Congressional) bans on aggression, intervention, or war crimes, or a moral consensus against murder, assassination, massacre, terrorism, torture, or the overthrow of a democratic system or an elected regime by encouraging a military coup, or the support and encouragement of repressive regimes that murder or massacre their own people.

The fact that covert actions of this sort are done repeatedly, almost routinely (though secretly, and denied), puts into perspective the otherwise-paradoxical willingness of American high officials to make nuclear threats--by their nature, terroristic--despite their public adherence to a Just War ethic and a specific stance of opposing terrorism. The latter proves to be simply hypocritical (though some self-deception is facilitated by restricting the term "terrorism" to anti-state actions by adversaries of the US or its allies), since by far the greatest amount of actual non-nuclear terrorism is carried out by state regimes that are strongly supported by the US, in many cases having been installed by the US with the help of CIA and other covert agencies.

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Likewise, the Just War ethic is simply rejected, privately, by these officials, in counter-revolutionary operations by "our friends," just as, I earlier recognized, they came to reject it during WWII and after with respect to non-nuclear strategic bombing by the US and UK and then with respect to nuclear planning and threats.

As prime examples of the link of US combat actions to prior US covert actions and covert foreign policy, US combat intervention in South Vietnam and in Korea aimed, among other things, to maintain an unpopular, authoritarian regime that the USG had effectively installed and supported for years by covert means. This very involvement had created a sense and appearance of US interest and commitment that was a major factor in the decision to intervene with combat forces. (The same applies to the proxy war and the preparations for US combat involvement in Nicaragua, to restore a US-supported regime that had been overthrown).

Thus, the many other cases where a sense of USG commitment to a repressive regime--threatened, often for very good reasons, by insurgency--reflected US covert responsibility for the installation and prolonged support of that regime, all posed risks of leading to USG decisions to undertake direct involvement in costly, risky, illegal and immoral counterinsurgency operations, often in support of regimes so repressive, corrupt and unpopular as to put to shame any direct association with them whatsoever and to doom any chance of their attaining legitimate, stable, unchallenged authority from their own citizens.

But why, after all, were there so many of these cases? Why was the USG willing to prolong its association with such regimes, long after their character had been revealed? Why were the prospects so strong for new covert involvements of this nature, and with these effects and risks, in the future? What has led the US so often into covert association--a well-justified sense of responsibility, a sense of concern, virtually a covert alliance or protective guarantee--with regimes that rely heavily on death squads and torture?

Chomsky and Herman have shown a striking correlation between the installation of such regimes (usually military, taking power in a coup) and an immediate, massive increase in the economic and military aid made available by the US, and by Western sources of credit. At the least, the repressive and murderous activities of these new regimes are "tolerated" by the US and credit agencies subject to US influence, they are no bar to generous aid and credit of a sort typically, in these cases, denied to the immediate predecessor regimes, even when these were elected civilian regimes. But the correlation is so striking, in terms also of amount and exact timing, and the repression so central to the activities of the new regimes, as to suggest strongly that the terrorist actions are actually being rewarded and supported, that they may be seen as somehow instrumental and necessary, not as regrettable "excesses" (let alone, crimes) to be punished and deterred, or errors or failures of control to be eliminated.

How could this be?